



# THE LONE WOLF

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

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hardness of her eyes modified, and that anger which primarily had marked her countenance gone by the time she chose to pursue her catechism.

"What's your name? No—don't answer! I saw your eyes waver, and I'm not interested in a makeshift alias. But it's a stock question, you know. Do you care for a cigar?"

She opened a mahogany humidor on the desk and extracted a box.

"Right—according to Hoyle—the criminal always refuses to smoke in these scenes. But let's forget the book and write our own lines. I'll ask you an original question: Why were you acting just now?"

"Acting?" Lanyard repeated, intrigued by the acuteness of this masterful woman's mentality.

"Precisely—pretending you're an ordinary criminal. For a moment I actually believed you afraid of me. But you're neither that nor a common crook. How do I know? Because you're unarmed; your voice has changed in the last two minutes to that of a cultivated man; you've stopped cringing and started thinking; and the way you walked across the floor just now and handled that chair showed me how powerfully you're made. If I hadn't found this revolver you could overpower me in an instant—and I'm no weakling, as women go. Then why the acting?"

Studying his captor with narrow interest, Lanyard smiled faintly and shrugged, but made no response. He could do no more than this—no more than spar for time. The longer he indulged this woman in her whim for the bizarre, the more assured were Lucy's chances of escape. By this time, he reckoned, she must have found her way through the service gate to the street. But he was on edge with apprehension of his chance.

"Come, come!" Mme. Omber insisted. "You're hardly civil, my good man. Answer my question."

"You don't expect me to do you?"

A glint of anger shone in the woman's eyes.

"You're right," she said shortly; "I dare say Sidonie isn't asleep yet. I'll get her to telephone while I stand guard over you."

Bending over the desk, without removing her gaze from the adventurer, his captor groped—for, found and pressed a call-button.

From some remote quarter of the house sounded the grumble of an electric bell.

"Pity you're so brazen," she commented. "Just a little less side, and you'd be a rather engaging person!"

Lanyard made no reply. In fact, he wasn't attending.

In this suspense the iron control which had always heretofore been his was breaking down—since now it was for another that he was concerned. And he wasted no strength trying to enforce it. The stress of his anxiety was both undisguised and indistinguishable. Nor did Mme. Omber overlook it.

"What's the trouble, eh? Is it that already the cell door clangs loudly in your ears?"

As the woman spoke Lanyard left his chair with a spring as lithe and sure and swift as an animal's, that carried him like a shot across the two yards or so that separated them.

A hair's breadth of error in his reckoning would have finished him, for the other had been alert for just such a move, and the revolver was nearly level with Lanyard's head when he seized it by the barrel, imprisoned the woman's wrist with his other hand, and in two movements had possessed himself of the pistol without hurting its owner.

"Don't be alarmed," he said quietly. "I'm not going to do anything more violent than to put this out of commission."

Breaking it smartly, he shot a shower of cartridges to the floor. The

sequence of the combination rang glibly off Lanyard's tongue. And at this with every evidence of excitement, at length beginning to hope—more than to believe—the woman set herself to open the strongbox. Within a minute she had succeeded, and the morocco-bound jewel box was in her hand.

A hasty examination assured her its treasure was intact.

"But why—" she stammered, pale with emotion—"why, monsieur, why?"

"Because I had decided to leave off stealing for a livelihood."

"When did you bring these jewels here?"

"Four or five nights since."

"And then—repeated, eh?"

"I own it."

"But came here again tonight to steal a second time what you had stolen once?"

"That's true, too."

"But I interrupted you—"

"Pardon, madame—not you, but my better self. I came to steal—I could not."

"Monsieur—you do not conceive. I fail to fathom your motives, but—"

A sudden shock of heavy feet trampling the parquet of the reception hall, accompanied by a clash of violently excited voices, silenced her and brought Lanyard instantly to the face about.

Above that loud wrangle—of which neither had received the least warning, so completely had their argument

"I am," Lanyard admitted tersely. "Ah! Now this does begin to grow interesting! Would you mind telling me why?"

"Because, madame, I have done you a great service, and feel I can count upon your gratitude."

The Frenchwoman's eyebrows lifted at this. "Doubtless monsieur knows what he's talking about—"

"Listen, madame. I am in love with a young woman, an American, a stranger, and friendless in Paris. If anything happens to me tonight, if I am arrested or assassinated—"

"Is that likely?"

"Quite likely, madame. I have enemies among the Apaches and in my own profession as well. I have reason to suspect that some of these are in this neighborhood tonight. I may possibly not escape them. In that event, this young lady of whom I speak will need a protector."

"And why must I interest myself in her fate, pray?"

"Because, madame, of this service I have done you. Recently, in London, you were robbed—"

"The woman started and colored with excitement. 'You know something of my stolen jewels?'"

"Everything, madame; it was I who stole them."

"You? You are, then, that Lone Wolf?"

"I was, madame."

"Why the past tense?" the woman demanded, eying him with a gathering frown.

"Because I am done with thieving."

"She threw back her head and laughed, but without mirth. 'A likely story, monsieur! Have you reformed since I caught you here—'"

"Does it matter when I take it that proof, visible, tangible proof of my sincerity, more than a meaningless date would be needed to convince you?"

"No doubt about that monsieur—the Lone Wolf!"

"Could you wish better proof than that of restoration of your stolen property?"

"Are you trying to bribe me to let you off with an offer to return my jewels?"

"I'm afraid emergency reformation wouldn't persuade you—"

"You do well to be so afraid."

"But if I can prove I've already reformed your jewels—"

"But you cannot."

"If madame will do me the favor to open her safe she will find them there—conspicuously placed."

"What nonsense—"

"Am I in error in assuming that madame didn't return from England until quite recently?"

"But today, in fact—"

"And you haven't troubled to investigate your safe since returning?"

"It had not occurred to me—"

"Then why not test my assertion before denying it?"

With an incredulous shrug Mme. Omber terminated a puzzled scrutiny of Lanyard's countenance and turned to the safe.

"But to have done what you declare you have," she argued, "you must have known the combination—since it appears you haven't done any breaking open."

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